

LITTLE PATUXENT REVIEW 1981

A Critique of "Town Center Options"

Morton Hoppenfeld

Your report of the Rouse Company's success in getting specialized and quality restaurants to locate at Baltimore's Harbor Place — indicated a degree of envy — "Why can't we in Columbia have such" — or a tivoli, etc. The answer is that Columbia is not Baltimore with its 3 million population, its thousands of hotel rooms, city built convention facilities, old harbor, a smell of success. There is simply no way to deny the role that size of city and timing plays in having the kind of things you are talking about.

It is possible but very unusual for small towns to achieve some of these special qualities — indeed, Columbia already has many. Typically, those small towns which make it have their own special characteristics, such as — uniqueness and distance from other major centers, as in Annapolis, Williamsburg, Aspen. Special historical-esthetic qualities are critical ingredients to beating the odds. Lastly, comes the accidental phenomenon of the benefactor — Paepke in Aspen, Rockefeller in Williamsburg, and state government in Annapolis.

Allow me to list for you some of the ingredients necessary to attain the downtown we would all enjoy in Columbia:

1. *A critical mass of space and divergent activities.* HRD is now involved in building a new hotel — another office building, and an extension to the mall. All will help — but not that much, yet. Important is the nature of those facilities — are they pedestrian oriented — do they have space for the kind of activities you want — do they enhance the environment — if not — why — who's watching — what happened to the Arch Review process — are the "right" people involved?

2. *Extra space.* One of the reasons that theatre, dance, galleries, etc., get started in old towns is because of the availability of cheap, flexible, downtown space — such as store fronts, lofts, warehouses, etc. Old cities have these because of the cyclical change in neighborhoods. The effects of a slack economy, etc., i.e., somebody is stuck with undesirable temporary space slightly off (broadway) and will rent it cheap to dance groups, theatre, galleries, etc. Available space is a necessary resource for the art community to then grow in. When it succeeds, the very success is self-defeating because the neighborhood gets "fancy." But the process of experimentation in the arts usually precedes the full-blown performing and viewing places.

Columbia doesn't have such space because it is new, except in the village centers or in neighborhood centers. The question is how to build it into new buildings, and what is the economic alternative to reduced real estate values.

The creation of a quality arts center, museum — requires millions of someone's money — if it is not a local bond issue, it needs a benefactor — what other choices are there?

The competition of Baltimore and Washington seems inevitable and unbeatable.

For the truly special culture consumption, I would accept the resources of Washington and Baltimore as part of Columbia and find a creative way to use them — i.e., don't compete, but become an outlet.

3. *There is a significant difference between cultural consumerism and individual, personal growth and development in the arts.* They are not separate — but don't have to occur in the same place. And, given the need to choose, the latter is where it is at! — *at least for me.*

One of the most exciting artistically creative centers in N.Y.C. over many years has been the 92nd St. YMHA. It is as removed from Downtown Manhattan as Columbia is from Downtown Washington and Baltimore. The important ingredient of this Y was its commitment to the arts. They have facilities for dance, theatre, and music, as well as the plastic and graphic arts. It is committed to be a "learning growing" center, where people do it; succeeding at this, it also occasionally is a natural home to traveling groups and performers of promise who can't fill the big houses "downtown."

I believe that Columbia can and should make its commitment to a downtown quality arts center — but one aimed at learning and doing, and allow for the trip to the "big city" to see Matisse or The Ballet. It may mean a reassessment of priorities between village resources and between kinds of resources, but that is what it's all about.

4. *Downtown can extend the tivoli-like quality of the summer lake front.* But this will take a commitment to do it, largely on the part of HRD & Rouse Co. — real estate offices will have to go, and risks will have to be taken. The Mall is part of it all. What is the next phase to be like? I hope not identical to the existing one. The hotel will help.

5. *One example of a downtown failure was putting the new county library in a park setting* — instead of a street setting which would allow more casual pedestrian interaction with other downtown places. Downtown needs streets to walk on — or well-used alternatives as the lake front mall.

6. *Downtown needs apartments and condos:* At high density within walking distance — on top of things like shops and offices. This is hard to accomplish, but HRD knows how. They may need help with zoning.

Clearly there is now, always was, the need for a planning, design and development process (short and long range). HRD has had it; the people — CA — need it and without it are relegated to ineffective housekeeping.

Virtually all the questions and issues raised in your papers were there in the first planning efforts which launched Columbia in the 60s. What was concluded then were not so much answers as hypotheses or best bets as to what would work best for the evolution of the communities and the people in this city. Now there is the potential of information and experience to modify the hypotheses, to "answer" the questions. Certainly conditions within and external to Columbia have changed and, needless to say, will continue to change.

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HRD has been consumed with its own agenda as has the County — both include some of the interests of the people (CA?). It is obvious that these interests are by no means aligned, nor should such be expected.

Divergent interests can be productive if there is a way to harness the resultant energy. There needs to be a method for direct and continuing interaction of ideas, plans and procedures among the parties. It should be perceived as working toward the separate and shared goals of each.

The County has solidified its view of itself in relation to Columbia and has well established processes for planning and decision making. HRD has been and remains reluctant to surrender power over its perceived needs to manage its economic destiny. Little has changed in these regards. What has changed dramatically since the Columbia process began is the absolute number and kinds of full-time staffs devoting their life energies to the qualities of Columbia. The beginnings of the City were nurtured by many creative, committed planners, designers and entrepreneurs of social institutions as well as physical facilities. If they were on the HRD staff they struggled to balance economic need against social and esthetic priority.

Over time CA developed parallel capabilities. Over the past five years these human resources have been reduced to the barest of minimums. The process is unbalanced; it lacks professional skills and the continuity of day-to-day work. Lay boards, volunteers, committees and the like are essential parts of a good community planning and development process, but they are insufficient.

The only intelligence I dare to add to your current efforts is to unequivocally assert that you are missing a key part of your process. Columbia (CA, the people) needs a full-time, high-quality staff capability to work at its current and future social and physical development and to interact with the other parties involved. To deny this is to continue the frustration of endless committee meetings with minimum capturing of the potential offered by the great armies of volunteers which can be mustered.

The people need leadership and organization which you seem to have, but you need a staff too. The right people are scarce and hard to find, yet "rightness" is a critical factor. At a minimum you need a Director of Community Planning and Design plus a Director of Programming, Evaluation, and Development. They will need appropriate support personnel or resources to hire special talents. For the tasks on hand a budget of not less than \$100,000 per year should be allocated. Perhaps in two or three years the need for such people will reduce, but it is there now.

I know that CA is broke and that practical minds caution against "dreaming about better futures." That attitude is a bankrupt one, leading to questionable futures. There should be no contradiction of purpose between dreaming and making hard economic decisions for today. Both are part of the planning, design and development process. It is the quality and timeliness of the dreams and decisions that make the difference.

I would enjoy the chance to discuss the substance of the issues and ideas reported. To attempt this here would only add to your current problems of paper weight. From time to time I am in Columbia and would volunteer some time to meet with your committee.

I must now come back to the conclusion of my first response to you.

Full-time professional planner/designer/entrepreneurs are needed to work at it in order to best utilize the energies of your extraordinary volunteer committees.

The Rouse Company, HRD still have a major role to play in the process and the resultant environment. They must be engaged in a partnership way.

So many of your notions are, in my opinion, unrealistic because of size, location, and the nature of Columbia having neither a wealthy class with the attitudes of *noblesse oblige* nor sufficient tax base as a function of mix and size. But others are real and possible — the issue is to sort them, to put energies into the possible and go for it (while not closing out the miracle of the benefactor).

Planning linked to development is the secret that brought Columbia to its current state. When development slowed down in '73, 4, 5, so did planning. Now that development is back in pace, I fear that creative planning by CA and HRD has not accompanied it.

You can remedy that condition — by your concerted actions, with more precise focus, and with HRD and county alliance, you can accomplish many of your objectives.

Little Patuxent Revue

Reference Works on Columbia

There is no detailed comprehensive history of the new town of Columbia. This is a selected bibliography of useful reference material

Brooks, Richard Oliver, *New Towns and Communal Values*. New York: Praeger, 1974.
(Based on brief, early visit to the new town. Erects a straw-man commitment by the developer of Columbia to communal values, and then laments ordinary suburban town creation.)

Breckenfeld, Gurney. *Columbia and the New Cities*. New York: Ives Washburn, 1971.
(Early, very sympathetic description of founding of the new town.)

Burby, Raymond and Shirley P. Weiss, *New Communities U.S.A.* Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1976.

(Report on an early 1970s study of American new towns. Rated Columbia superior to other private and federally-funded new towns of the same period, but found little difference in resident quality of life between new towns and new suburban developments involving similar populations. Reviewed in first issue of the *Little Patuxent Revue*.)

Gans, Herbert, "Planning for the Everyday Life and Problems of Suburban New Town Residents," in H. Gans, *People and Plans*. New York: Basic Books, 1968.
(Pragmatic vision of possibilities and limitations for planners by a member of the work group consultants to the Columbia developer. Much of pessimistic outlook based on Gans' study, *The Levittowners*.)

Hoppenfeld, Morton, "The Columbia Process," *Architects Yearbook*, 1967.
(Discussion of planning and design by Columbia's chief planner.)